

Joint Committee on Legislative Management

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For nearly forty-five years, CWEALF has advocated for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we educate Connecticut residents, especially low-income women, about their rights and connect them to critical legal advocacy resources and attorneys. We also provide sexual harassment prevention trainings to companies, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions, to create a safe and respectful work culture.

We applaud state lawmakers for coming together today to examine the General Assembly's own sexual harassment policy.

The #MeToo movement shines a stark spotlight on sexual harassment and its pervasive presence in every sector – from Hollywood movie sets to restaurants and cable newsrooms to hotel housekeeping. The persistence of sexual harassment in workplaces across our state does not exclude the General Assembly or the State Capitol.

Both nationally and in Connecticut, sexual harassment remains a significant problem. According to a recent report from the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Select Task Force, sexual harassment in the workplace impacts 25 to 85 percent of women. Forty percent of women experience unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion, even if they don't label it as "sexual harassment", and 60 percent of women experience unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion, or sexually crude conduct or sexist comments in the workplace.¹

The EEOC report also shows that upwards of 85 percent of people who experience workplace harassment never file a formal legal charge and approximately 70 percent of employees never complain internally. According to our own Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, only 145 cases of sexual harassment were filed this year.

¹ Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace. 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report_summary.cfm

CWEALF strongly supports legislation introduced this year to combat sexual harassment in our state, especially SB 132 and HB 5043, but the General Assembly must also examine its own practices.

Since 1993, Connecticut companies of 50 or more employees are required to train supervisors within six months of assuming their position. The training is currently required for supervisors only a single time. As SB 132 and HB 5043 address, this training must be more frequent to include all employees.

Employers, including the General Assembly, should take a comprehensive approach to prevent and address harassment with the inclusion of civility and bystander intervention in training, climate surveys, an ongoing assessment of reporting mechanisms, and new measures to hold managers and supervisors accountable for preventing and responding to harassment. Bystander intervention gives employees the tools to intervene or challenge the inappropriate behaviors that lead to harassment and discrimination. This, in turn, creates a respectful and inclusive workplace.

The General Assembly is not the typical employer or workplace. CWEALF urges lawmakers to also examine the reporting process for lobbyists, advocates and members of the community who frequent the State Capitol and Legislative Office Building, interact with legislators and staff and may experience sexual harassment or assault.

Leadership from both parties must take the appropriate steps to ensure that the General Assembly is a safe and welcoming place for all who work here, whether formally or as an advocate for policy change.

As the legislative session comes to a close, Connecticut lawmakers must act to pass proposed legislation to combat sexual harassment in our state's workplaces and set steps in place to examine your own workplace practices.